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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1434
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 4215
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 2027
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 1892
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY 2463
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0878
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 2823
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 001136

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SOVI](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: RESTORING VIRGINITY GAINING
POPULARITY DESPITE MEDICAL AND SOCIAL RISKS

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: Strong cultural traditions demanding a girl be a virgin on her wedding night have made operations designed to surgically recreate the semblance of virginity more popular among young Turkmen women. While the operation is relatively cheap compared to similar operations in Europe, Turkmenistan has no qualified doctors or clinics capable of safely performing the operation, and the procedure carries a high risk of medical complications. Those who can't afford the operation will try to marry in another region or risk lying to their husbands. Showcasing a double standard, it is also common for a man to have extramarital relations with another woman and support her financially as a "second wife." Because the value of virginity is grounded in cultural practice, not religion, it is possible that as Turkmenistan becomes more liberal, the perceived need for the procedure will lessen. END SUMMARY.

13. (SBU) In Turkmenistan, strong cultural traditions demand that a girl be a virgin on her wedding night. Premarital relations on the part of a fiancée are considered perfidious, and a husband will often kick her out if she is found to be 'tainted,' humiliating her family and severely limiting her future opportunities. However, since the beginning of the new regime, word of mouth has begun to popularize hymenoplasty, an operation designed to surgically recreate the semblance of virginity.

A DANGEROUS OPERATION AND NO QUALIFIED DOCTORS

14. (SBU) Turkmenistan has no sophisticated clinics capable of safely performing the operation. Furthermore, most Turkmen cannot travel easily outside the country to places like Tunisia, where the procedure is routinely carried out. Instead, Turkmen women must rely on gynecologists to secretly perform the surgery, sometimes in their homes or in the backroom of a clinic.

15. (SBU) The operation is frequently quite cheap - \$100-200 or even less, as compared to Europe, where the surgery costs several thousand dollars. It is a purely cosmetic procedure,

generally performed a few days before the wedding night. However, there are practically no qualified Turkmen doctors and few Russian-trained doctors available. Therefore, the procedure is often performed painfully and incompetently, possibly leading to further medical complications.

NO OPERATION, NO EXIT

¶6. (SBU) Those who cannot afford the operation have few options. Some will lie about their virginity and hope the husband will not find out. Others may be forced to marry in another region, far away from their hometown. Even in Ashgabat, the capital, it is customary for men to "do a background check," finding out everything about a girl they intend to wed. As one local put it, "Ashgabat is a small city - everybody knows someone who knows you."

THE "TWO WIVES" PHENOMENON

¶7. (SBU) To a certain degree, some of these strict traditions are loosening. Some couples will disclose previous sexual activity to each other without seeking approval from their families. Others are aware of it but simply choose not to acknowledge it.

¶8. (SBU) A contradictory parallel to the increase in these operations is the well-established "two wives" phenomenon, when a man has obligations to two women. Usually the result of loveless arranged marriages, the husband is bound to support his legal wife but will frequently have a relationship with another woman, whom he does not consider

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his mistress. He will support this "second wife" financially and raise children with her. However, because this liaison exists outside the realm of legal marriage, there is potential for a lot of problems. For example, if the second wife dies, who will take care of the children? These gray areas illustrate the tension between an official legal system and the often stronger cultural traditions of Turkmen society.

¶9. (SBU) COMMENT: Although Turkmenistan is a predominantly Muslim country, women seek out hymenoplasty for cultural, not religious reasons. As increased Western investment brings with it Western cultural practices, Turkmen youth are pulled between a desire to be more sexually liberal and the demands of a more traditional community. The risk of medical complications arising from the procedure is heightened by the ineptitude of doctors and the need to perform the surgery in private. Still, because the value of virginity is grounded in cultural prejudice, it is possible that as Turkmenistan becomes more liberal, the perceived need for the procedure will lessen. END COMMENT.

CURRAN